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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
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DEAR MEMBER,

A well-known speaker is reported to have said in a recent speech that our enemies have to be stamped out and exterminated because "they are vermin, and worse."

WHAT IS MAN?

One need not make too much of a fuss about the casual phrases on which a speaker chances to express his detestation of Nazi inhumanities. But what one says, many think, and the language we lightly use tends imperceptibly to shape our thoughts and establish a habit of mind. False thinking about man is certain to defeat our efforts to create a healthy society. Between the trivial view of man, which allows us to speak of any members of the human race as vermin, and the Christian view of the dignity of man as a responsible, moral being, created in the image of God, there exists a gulf that is of greater ultimate significance for the future of mankind than even the outcome of our present struggle with the Axis Powers.

Devils, if you like, but not vermin. Capable of crimes deserving eternal damnation, but not trash. From thinking of any class of human beings as vermin, it is only a step to the view recently propounded in Nazi circles that those who inhabit the thickly populated areas of great cities are inferior members of the species and that their destruction by bombs is no great loss to society. Unless man possesses an inherent dignity as a being responsible to God and the object of God's care, his worth is something to be settled by the will of the stronger; in the eyes of Hitler Jews and Christians are vermin. The dignity belongs to all men, or to none. Freedom is a terrible gift, and even in committing diabolical crimes man bears the marks of his greatness in the scale of creation.

The temptation is especially strong in war time to lose sight of what man really is. Thousands of lives may be blotted out in a single city in a night; the slaughter in great battles is on a colossal scale. None of us can wholly escape the debasing influence of this cheapening of human life. Everything depends on how we react to it. Do we acquiesce in the whole-sale destruction, inwardly resigning ourselves to the fact that individual human lives are without significance? Or does the spectacle awaken in us a deepened sense of the tragic nature of man's existence and of his fallen grandeur? Endowed with reason and freewill, men have the power to commit gigantic wrongs and possess at the same time loyalties which make on them unconditional demands and for the sake of which the sacrifice of millions of lives does not seem too great a price to pay.

CONDITIONS IN OCCUPIED RUSSIA

An account has reached us from a trustworthy source about conditions in occupied Russia. The writer has travelled extensively in the area, and speaks Russian, so that he has had unusual opportunities of learning how things are.

The complete failure of Rosenberg and his associates to understand the Russian problem has led the Germans to make colossal mistakes. They looked on the Russian people as fitted only to be slaves, and counted on the forces of local separatism to break

up Russia. They immensely under-estimated the potential force of Russian national feeling, the existence in Russia of elements of effective leadership and, in particular, the importance of the religious question.

The writer finds abundant evidence that religion is still alive in the hearts of the Russian people—a fact which is confirmed by evidence from many other sources. The conditions of intellectuals, workers and peasants in the occupied areas he describes as in many cases pitiable. But this has been of little propaganda value to the Germans, because they have committed themselves unreservedly to a war of conquest without even the pretext of making it a war of liberation. The treatment of the population by the occupying armies has been ruthless, and the war has been waged with almost unprecedented ferocity. There has been a serious declension in the discipline and conduct of the German armies as compared with the armies of 1914-1918. No one in Russia doubts any longer that the Germans really desire to annex the conquered regions, and that the population will meet with severer treatment than in other occupied Slav countries. The devastation has been widespread and terrible. Epidemics have made their appearance, and while the German army is able to some extent to protect itself, the civilian population is suffering cruelly from diseases, famine and nervous exhaustion.

If the Germans had honestly sought to emancipate the people from Communism, understood how to enlist national sentiment on their side and given unreserved support to the religious movement, the writer believes that they might have drawn to themselves a considerable section of the Russian population. The effect of their policy, however, has been to evoke the strongest sentiments of Russian nationalism against them. What began as an anti-Communist crusade has now become a struggle of life and death between the Teutonic and Slav races which is likely to result in the destruction of millions of Germans and Russians. It is very doubtful whether anything that the Germans can now do could change the situation, since the hatred between the belligerents has passed beyond all control, and the German purpose of remaining in the country as conquerors and oppressors is bound to meet with unyielding resistance from the Russians.

THE SUPPLEMENT

No Supplement has aroused a greater interest than the one on "Ecumenical Christianity and the Working Classes" by W. G. Symons (C.N-L. No. 92). It was recognized in all quarters that it raised issues of first-class importance. It was followed up by a Supplement containing comments by the Bishop of Bradford and others (C.N-L. No. 100). In consultation with ministers of Free Churches in different parts of the country the Rev. John Marsh, the Chaplain of Mansfield College, Oxford, has contributed this further Supplement on the subject.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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